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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on school report cards as an accountability tool, and on how their use interacts with one of the most persistent problems facing the public education system, i.e., the continuing underachievement of minority students. The paper looks specifically at the issues concerning the desirability of reporting student performance by race and ethnicity at the school level. The use of school based performance data reporting requirements, or school report cards as they are commonly termed, reflects a convergence of a number of different lines of research and development including a greater need for public accountability, positive research findings on the role of parental involvement in school performance, research on effective schools, and increased data management capacity at the state and local levels. Information for the study was gathered in a series of interviews with school, district, and community based officials knowledgeable about the role of parents, minorities, and school improvement. The intent was to explore the intersection of state mandated school based performance reporting policies and their impact on increasing the visibility of minority students. The Dade County, Florida school system was selected for its recent reform activities and diverse student population. The study concluded that parents do not pay attention to the school report cards. Most principals interviewed believed that requiring schools to report performance data by race and ethnicity has a negative impact on improving the educational system. They believed that such reporting was divisive and detrimental, and thus further increasing racial tensions. District and community officials, however, did not agree. Contains 20 references. (DK)

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ACCOUNTABILITY, INVISIBILITY AND THE POLITICS OF NUMBERS: SCHOOL REPORT CARDS AND RACE

A paper presented at the American Educational Research Association

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Accountability, Invisibility and the Politics of Numbers:

School Report Cards and Race

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Minority Performance and School Report Cards

This chapter focuses on school report cards as an accountability tool and how their use interacts with one of the most persistent problems plaguing the public education system, continuing underachievement of minority students. Despite three decades of attention to the issue, minority student school performance lags considerably behind that of majority students. Furthermore, the extent of the gap has often been masked by aggregate data.

Policymakers have turned to school-based performance data reporting requirements to help address the problem. Reporting student and school performance data by race and ethnicity, holds out the promise to redress the situation (1) by providing accurate data on the nature, extent and location of the problem and (2) by fomenting pressure by parents and other community members on school officials, motivating them to focus more energies on ameliorating inequities. However, there has been virtually no research on utilization or impact of school-based performance data reporting requirements (Southern Regional Education Board 1992 and Mackett and McKeough 1992).

This chapter looks specifically at the issues concerning the desirability of reporting student performance by race and ethnicity at the school level. Would such a policy increase the likelihood of resources being targeted to students in greatest need, making them more visible? Or, would the reporting of these disaggregated data reinforce negative stereotypes about the performance of minority students? Do school officials behave differently when these data are

available? What is the impact on local school policy when these data are made available by race and ethnicity? These are important questions that go to the root of school-based accountability policies - their purposes and their effects on schools, on teachers, and students.

The Search for Accountability: School Report Cards

School-based performance data reporting requirements, or school report cards as they are commonly termed, are an increasingly popular mechanism by which policymakers hope to make schools more accountable for their actions. Currently, over one-half of all states require districts or schools to produce and disseminate some form of report to parents and the general community on educational performance (Education Commission of the States 1992). Information to be included on the reports generally includes data on enrollment, racial and ethnic background of students, student performance, teacher salaries, teacher length of service, and other such commonly agreed upon characteristics of school organization and performance. Claims made for the benefits of school report cards are substantial and reasonable. The Southern Regional Education Board (1992) summarizes the policymaker's presumed intentions in requiring the reporting of school data to parents and the community as follows:

> Behind all of these efforts is the understanding that information can shape public support for education-that parents and state leaders need to be kept-up-to-date about what students know and can do. When schools report regularly and clearly on results, government, business, and community leaders are more willing to ease regulations and leave decisions in the hands of teachers and principals. Taxpayers also want a straightforward report card showing whether their major investment in public education is paying off.

The increasing popularity of report cards reflects a convergence of a number of different lines of research and development including a greater need for public accountability, positive research findings on the role of parental involvement in school performance, research on effective schools and, finally, increased data management capacity at the state and local levels.

Accountability

Policymakers's search for greater accountability in public school performance has been constant from the beginning of publicly funded schools. However, since the 1970s, the search has become more stringent, urgent and unrelenting. The fragmenting of the coalition of educational interest groups in the sixties, resulting in, among other things, the establishment of teachers' unions, significantly reduced the credibility of professional educators and forced policymakers to seek alternative and presumably more objective sources of information for the purposes of evaluating school effectiveness. This interest led to data-based reporting and evaluating as a primary means of establishing accountability (Kirst 1990).

Parental Involvement

Simultaneously, the research base supporting the effects of parental involvement on student achievement has become increasingly strong (Epstein 1987 Henderson 1987). However, it is worth noting that parental involvement takes two distinct forms. One, parents may become more involved with their child's own schooling or, two, they may function as "outside" monitors and policymakers, observing and advising on school operations. School report cards policies rest on the latter assumption, that parents, motivated by their interest in their own child's achievement, will seek greater involvement at the school level. However, the evidence supporting the positive effects of parents involvement in their child's own academic development (i.e., providing them a quiet place to do homework, reading to them, etc.) is much stronger than the research on the effects of parents as advisors on school policy (Rich 1987).

Effective Schools Research

Interest in formulating policies that focus on the school as the unit of accountability and school improvement has been bolstered by the effective schools movement. The effective schools

research demonstrated positive impacts of schoolwide variables such as shared goals and vision, strong leadership and high expectations for student performance (Brookover *et al.* 1979, Edmonds 1979, 1986, Legotte and Bancroft 1985, and Purkey and Smith 1983).

Information Management Systems

Finally, through the stimulation of federal reporting requirements and the greater role of state-level offices in educational reform, there has been significant development in the technological capacity of states and districts to manage complex information systems, enabling them to produce educational performance data at increasingly disaggregated levels, including school-specific and student-specific data. The type of data on school and student performance laid out in school report cards have only recently been available to states and districts.

These lines of research and development which have been occurring over the last two decades - need for greater accountability, benefits of parental involvement, effective schools research and improved data management capacities - converged to produce a credible rationale and capacity for the use of school report cards as a tool for pursuing public accountability. In addition, as a policy instrument, it had a number of appeals to state policymakers. The approach philosophically reinforced the time-honored notion within the American polity of local control of public education, the neighborhood being the most local of all units. It had the added benefit of also situating responsibility for redressing whatever problems the information might reveal at the local level (a particularly attractive feature for state policymakers.) Finally, it is a relatively low-cost strategy, basically relying on the voluntary contribution of parents, motivated by the desire to improve their child's education.

Reform Context: Dade County Public Schools

A series of interviews were conducted with school-, district- and community-based officials knowledgeable about the role of parents, minorities and school improvement. The intent was

to explore the intersection of state-mandated school-based performance reporting policies (school report cards) and their impact on increasing the visibility of minority students.

Dade County Public Schools in Florida was selected for a number of reasons. One, the state of Florida has mandated school report cards since 1976. Florida has a long tradition of legislative activism. In fact, it has been described as having the most active state legislature in the country in the area of education (Wise 1978). And while it has been known most recently for its highly prescriptive reform acts of the early 1980s, it has a much longer history of pursuing accountability through deregulatory approaches, granting considerable fiscal and managerial flexibility to local schools. In the early 1970s, in the heyday of a national accountability movement, the state of Florida passed out a comprehensive and ambitious package of legislation dealing with accountability (Herrington, Johnson and O'Farrell 1992). One of the critical components of this state accountability strategy was the requirement that all schools provide reports to the community. These reports were to include information on student achievement, attitudinal data on teachers, and other school characteristics. In the late 1970s this legislation was amended specifically to require a school report card that provided data by race and ethnicity. Between 1976 and 1991, Florida has required schools to provide information on student attendance, dropouts, corporal punishment, suspensions and expulsions broken down by race and gender. Significantly, Florida does not require student achievement data to be reported by race and gender.

The public school system of Dade County was selected for its recent reform activities and diverse student population. It is the fourth largest school system in the country. It embraces large cities such as Miami, Miami Beach and Hialeah, a number of other smaller municipalities and a large unincorporated area. Like other large urban school districts, it has been struggling with high poverty rates, high numbers of non-English speaking and immigrant children, as well as with issues of school and community violence and high underemployment.

The City of Miami has the fourth highest poverty rate in the U.S. The diversity in population is extreme: the school district reports the existence of 120 distinct cultures and 54 languages among its students. It experiences high inter-district and intra-district student mobility. Currently, 1000 students from other countries are entering the school district monthly. If one lists only its major population groups, its enrollment currently consists of 47% Hispanics, 34% African-Americans, 18% non-Hispanic whites and one percent Asians or Native Americans. It has been particularly affected by the unstable political and economic environment of Caribbean and Central American countries, resulting in unanticipated numbers of immigrants with volatile political alignments and diverse social characteristics. It has also been experiencing extremely high rates of growth with the school population increasing by around 10,000 students a year for the last few years (Council of the Great City Schools 1991 and Visiedo 1992).

Dade has responded to the situation with one of the most ambitious reform efforts in the country. For the last six years, it has been developing a school-based management/shared-decision-making approach that has focused on teacher professional development and school-based decision-making. One of the fundamental concepts of the Dade County school-based management initiative is to allow instructional reform responsibility to devolve to the school-level so schools can respond to the unique mix of their own students, staff and neighborhoods. The Dade County experiment has been considered one of the most promising and ambitious restructuring efforts around the country. Though outcome data on the success of these reforms are inconclusive at this point (Collins and Hanson 1991), it is clear that the level of activity and the glare of the national spotlight makes it a particularly interesting site in which to investigate school-based reform strategies and minority concerns.

Interviews with School and Community Officials

A broad cross-section of school and community officials, knowledgeable about community relations, minority performance and public schooling were interviewed. The respondents were asked the following: What are the arguments for and against reporting school performance data by race and ethnicity? Whose interests are being served by breaking down achievement data by race and ethnicity? Whose interests are being served by not reporting student data in a disaggregated form? What issues are involved in efforts to report student achievement data by race and ethnicity? What are the sources of resistance to such efforts? What are effective ways of making students who fail less invisible and schools more accountable for their failures?

The interviews were conducted in January 1992. A total of 21 individuals were interviewed in Dade County. The interviews lasted from between 30 minutes to an hour and a half, and, for the most part, were conducted by telephone. The length varied considerably according to the position of the individual being interviewed and the individuals' own interest or extent of opinions about the issues raised. Three distinct groups of individuals were interviewed. One group of respondents were principals of elementary and high schools. The principals and the schools were chosen to represent a mix of race and ethnicity among the principals and race, ethnicity and socio-economic status among the student population. A second group of respondents were officials at the district level and included senior officials from the following offices: public affairs, parental involvement, Chapter One, school board, student advocacy, a district-wide citizen's advisory committee and information technology. The final group of respondents were community-based and included the Urban League, a community action group established in response to race riots in 1983, a Cuban-American community group which operates two alternative schools in conjunction with the school district, the Chamber of Commerce and the education reporter for the major newspaper for the city. Parents were represented in the latter two groups. Members of all major racial and ethnic groups were included: African-Americans, Haitians, Cubans and whites.

The Politics of School Report Cards

Parents and School Report Cards

The most striking finding from the interviews was that though the state had been requiring the school report cards to be disseminated to parents since 1976, there was agreement among all interviewed that parents did not pay attention to the data on their children's school report cards. There was not one respondent who believed parents, on the whole, paid much attention to the reports. Parents, teachers, administrators and community-based advocacy groups all agreed that parents did not read the reports. Comments about parental attention were strongly stated, unqualified for the most part, and discouraging. Examples are: "majority of all families totally entrust the process to school professionals"; "my suspicion is that the reports are not very well read;" "parents don't ever complain about anything except discipline," and "nobody ever reads the reports." The responses of community-based advocacy groups that work with parents to foster greater involvement were no different: "parents aren't really aware of what's going on " and "few people really pay attention to these reports."

The only two reactions that differed slightly were one, from a school board member: "very few parents are involved as they should be, but the few who are involved are very involved" and from a community advocacy professional who works to get parents more involved, "while parents are not very involved, they are more involved than they used to be."

Principals and School Report Cards

In response to the question, does requiring schools to report performance data by race and ethnicity have a beneficial or detrimental impact on improving the educational system, all principals except one believed the impact was mixed, irrelevant or negative, with negative being the most common response. (See Table 1).

Table 1. Impact of School Report Cards by Role[a]

	Positive	Negative	Mixed	Irrelevant[b]
Principals	1	4	2	3
District Administrators	4	-	-	1
Community Advocates	5	1	-	-

[a]It is important to note that no respondents believed the report cards had a significant impact on parents or the community either positively or negatively.

[b]Respondents that indicated "irrelevant" based their opinion on one of the following observations: (1) it doesn't matter because no one pays attention to the report cards and (2) Dade County is so racially conscious that everyone is used to having data broken down by race and ethnicity and no one pays attention to it.

The majority of principals believed that performance reporting by race and ethnicity was divisive and detrimental to the school community and emphasizing racial and ethnic performance differentials further increased racial tensions at the school. They saw their responsibility as treating each student fairly and equitably regardless of race in order to develop a cohesive, unified school culture.

The following comments from one high school principal was typical of those of principals:

> It was reported that 60% of the students we suspended were black, and we were questioned on it, but it doesn't change the way we deal with students. I deal with every case individually, regardless of the student's ethnicity. In my opinion there's no benefit in publishing it, because factors other than race are involved in performance.

Another principal argued that performance should be reported by race and ethnicity at the district level, so that problems can be identified and addressed; however, the same data should not be reported at the school level unless accompanied by substantial education on what the data mean, otherwise, it would stir up the community and create mistrust and resentment. Another principal from a high school with fairly affluent students asserted that all energies should be expended on improving kids' performance and nothing else; reporting by race and ethnicity is often used for political reasons and doesn't really help children. Another principal

asserted that "good teachers don't let kids fall through cracks, regardless of the kids' color."

A number of principals said that reporting performance data by race and ethnicity perpetuated racial stereotypes. One principal gave an example of the potentially detrimental impact of reporting school performance data by race and ethnicity. Performance levels had declined as the percentage of minorities in one school had increased, resulting in the more affluent residents moving out of the school's enrollment area, thus further accelerating the decline in the school's performance levels. Another stated that reporting data broken down by race and ethnicity made no difference because, due to highly segregated residential patterns, everyone knew the racial composition of most schools anyway.

District Administrators, Community Groups and School Report Cards

In contrast, district administrators and community-based individuals were of the opinion that reporting data by race and ethnicity was necessary to assure that minority populations received needed attention. When asked the advantages of reporting data by race and ethnicity, typical responses were: "It helps us target resources at the students who need them the most" and "helps us pinpoint where the deficiencies are and allows us to form strategies to address them". Another one commented that "schools got away with a lot of things against black children prior to it because schools didn't have to report everything. I have seen a trend of decreasing incidents against blacks." Still another, "Breaking it down by race is good, so we can find out what kind of access all groups have to mainstream services. For example, reporting percentage of students on free lunch isn't putting anyone down, it's showing a need. I don't think objective knowledge hurts anyone. I have no reservations about it. It breaks the cycle of error and lack of opportunity." While acknowledging that the data might serve to reinforce negative stereotypes, it was argued that objective data reporting was a critical safeguard for minority interests.

The same division between principals and other interviewers was found in respondents' replies to a related question: "Does reporting student performance by race and ethnicity result in resources being better targeted to where they are needed the most." While school principals insisted that school improvements occurred individually and internally to the school, those outside the school building responded that it was necessary to collect objective data analyzed by race and ethnicity in order to identify areas of need.

Another interesting finding in addition to the fact that responses broke down by principals versus the other two groups is that the responses did not differ between the other two groups: district administrators and community groups. The opinions of district administrators and community groups (most of whom were minority advocacy groups) on the impact of school report cards and the benefits of breaking data down by race were essentially the same.

School Report Cards and School Improvement

The majority of the respondents, both school-based and other, did not believe that the data themselves were used for planning purposes to effectuate school improvement at the school level (unless forced to by district offices). A common response was "Only the experts' at the district level pay attention to the data. School personnel locally don't pay attention to it and don't use it." The same respondent also added, "accountability cannot be done at the district level; local schools must take responsibility."

A number of reasons were cited. One, in Dade County data are supplied by the school but the compilation and analysis of the data occur at the district office. While this provides better assurance of comparability across schools, a number of respondents noted this procedure had the unintended negative consequence of separating the data analysis from the school-based planning and improvement process. Second, the capacity for effective use of the data may not be sufficient at the school level. A district official charged with civil rights compliance stated:

"I have not seen a change in the data's impact as laws have required that the data be disaggregated more explicitly over the years. For one thing, the reports are too complex, not only for the general public, but sometimes even for school personnel as well."

District Office and School Report Cards

Almost all respondents, particularly district administrators and outside community groups and also some principals, believed the data were scrutinized carefully at the district level and served as an impetus to targeting new policies and resources to deficiencies that emerged. As one respondent stated, "The reports probably have their greatest value at the district level, where disparities can be identified and change can be coordinated and implemented."

The Media and School Report Cards

In stark contrast to the respondents' views about the lack of parental involvement, the role of the media was seen as powerful. Though questions about the media were not on the interview protocol, over half of the respondents on their own brought up the media when queried about community reaction to issues about reporting performance data by race and ethnicity. These respondents stated that it was the media reporting on performance data by race and ethnicity that triggered community interest and response, not the school report cards. The ability of the media to stimulate public interest was considered virtually unlimited yet this power was not always used professionally or helpfully. A number of respondents noted that sensational stories dealing with sexual harassment, drugs and violence dominated media reporting. Also, schools were often pulled into a story when the school was not involved in the incident. The example given was a headline entitled "North Miami High Student Arrested" even though neither the arrest nor alleged offense occurred on school grounds. Another respondent noted that stories about individuals or "incidents" commanded media attention but not reports on data. The exception to this was the release of the annual SAT data. These were seen as being expertly released to the press, because the press was given a comparative analysis on which to

peg the stories. One principal when asked who does benefit from performance reporting by race replied, "Only those activist groups who are interested in perpetuating the differences so they can get press out of it."

The respondents were split as to how positive an impact the media reporting had on school improvements. Some believed that media were too sensationalist, particularly the electronic media, exploiting incidents to generate reader/viewer interest; others believed the reporting to be a healthy stimulant to the educational system, making it more responsive. But all agreed that issues concerning performance and race were raised by the media (not by the school report card) and were successful in stimulating parent and community interest.

The author interviewed the journalist who covered the education beat for the city's major newspaper. She believed that mentioning race and ethnicity was important and cited cases in which her stories had resulted in reallocation of resources to meet the needs of minority students. Though noting that schools often do not like the publicity attendant to media coverage of racial disparities, she also claimed to have observed that the same schools who complained about performance data being reported in the media by race and ethnicity would take advantage of the resulting publicity to argue for more resources, citing the same data.

Limitations of School Report Cards

Even those who believed the impact of reporting school performance data by race and ethnicity to be positive, were quick to emphasize that data reporting in of itself was of very little value and may even be misleading at times. Two examples were given. One, it was noted that parental involvement had different interpretations in different cultures. A district administrator related an issue involving Haitian parents. Repeated efforts by the district to involve Haitian parents in their children's education had not been successful. The reason turned out to be that in Haitian culture, to question a teacher about a child's educational progress was considered a

sign of disrespect to the teachers. Another example cited of potentially misleading interpretations of data regarded the publication of corporal punishment data by race and ethnicity. Prior to the abolishment of corporal punishment in the district, data was published indicating that African-American children were paddled disproportionately to white children. This created considerable hostile community reaction. Upon closer examination it was revealed that African-American parents gave permission for corporal punishment much more frequently than white parents.

Another issue that surfaced was more practical in nature. The explosion of different racial, ethnic and cultural groups meant that much of the reporting by race and ethnicity lacked sensitivity to very substantial differences in sub-groups. An official from a Cuban community advocacy group described as follows the racial composition of one school in which he is involved: 60% Native Nicaraguans, 10% Native Honduran, 12% Native Cuban, 17% American-born Hispanic and 1% White. As he said, "the data we have even now is not getting analyzed. The registrars say it would be a record-keeping nightmare to have to report by Cuban, Honduran, whether native-born and so forth."

Impact of School Report Cards on Minority Concerns

One may conclude from this that some of the basic assumptions underlying the use of school report cards as an instrument for accountability for addressing race and ethnicity-based performance gaps may need to be rethought. The reports are presumably designed to serve two inter-related functions: they provide a mechanism for parents to become informed about the performance of the schools where their children attend and, if dissatisfied, apply pressure on school officials and, secondly, they provide the school-specific data necessary to diagnose the problem.

However, the interviews reported above suggest that the mechanism is ineffective. Parents are

not reading the reports and the data are not being used by school officials for school improvement. It is, thus, unlikely that under current conditions, the report cards themselves are resulting in school improvement, at least not as a result of activity at the school or neighborhood level.

Principals reacted negatively to the very idea of categorizing students by race and ethnicity and linking it to their performance. Principles repeatedly emphasized that they saw their job as exactly the opposite; i.e., to ignore students' race and ethnicity and to treat all students equally at all times. They insistently claimed that they spent their energies producing a school climate in which every child is treated as an individual and where expectations remain the same for all students. Their reaction to focusing on data which highlights the differential performance of sub-groups within the school population was that such policies undermine their efforts to build a socially cohesive and color-blind environment.

On the other hand, district administrators and community-based advocates while acknowledging the minimal or even negative impact of reporting data by race and ethnicity at the school-level to parents and the community, insisted that the data had to be reported. And there was agreement that the use of disaggregated data by district officials did focus the attention of district officials and the media on disparities among racial and ethnic groups, sometimes resulting in targeting of additional resources.

It is notable that the lack of utilization of the data at the school level appears in a school system undergoing a dramatic experiment in school-based management. Considerable discretion over policy, personnel and budget is being relegated to school-level planning councils in select schools. Presumably utilization of school-level data at the school level would be greater in this district than in others.

School Report Cards, Parents and the Visibility of Minorities

The discussion above suggests that there is an essential disjuncture between the environment conducive to school-level improvement strategies and numbers-based strategies designed to eliminate race- or ethnicity-based institutional biases.[1] These analyses suggest that the historical advancement of the racial equality movement proceeding from an emphasis on equity to one emphasizing excellence may be at odds with itself. The very strategies that protect minorities from being invisible, i.e., public accounting and reporting, may be antithetical to the characteristics of a healthy school culture and environment which school-based management attempts to foster. The equity agenda requires confronting racial differences and holding up inequities for public inspection and redress. However, the excellence movement is best pursued through the development of trust and community among people involved in a shared enterprise. Unfortunately, the goals of the equity movement have yet to be achieved while there is a layering on of an excellence movement creating new and additional sets of expectations.

Dade County may be a harbinger of future urban communities in the multiplicity of races, ethnicities and languages represented in its population. There is no dominant minority group or even one or two dominant groups, but rather a splintering of a complex diversity in which race, culture and languages group in differing combinations. Stratifying strategies that attempt to define, categorize and respond separately may be insufficient and impractical as the numbers of groups multiply. Furthermore, the knowledge base upon which to base differential instructional approaches to meet the needs of different minority groups is underdeveloped and controversial in application (Weis 1988).[2]

Perhaps what seems to have evolved in Dade County, even if not by design, is a rational response to these conflicting streams of events. The development of a two-tiered strategy may be necessary to capture the benefits of school cohesiveness and community-building at the

school level without losing the monitoring and oversight critical to identify and alert educators and others to continuing poor achievement among racial and ethnic sub-groups of students.

Conclusion

There was no evidence in these interviews that the reporting of student performance data by race and ethnicity at the school level to parents and the community in and of itself assisted in improving the visibility of minority educational issues or addressing racial inequalities. (That did occur but it was due to the analysis of school-specific data by district administrators and the media, not because of the school report cards being disseminated to parents.) Because the parents did not themselves appear to read, much less use the data, the impact at the school level would be considered minimal. Within the school itself, school officials clearly believed that race-based analyses were divisive to the development of a healthy educational climate within the school and to positive community relations without the school.

What role does this leave for school report cards? The responses of the individuals interviewed seriously question the effectiveness of school report card strategies in terms of stimulating parental interest and pressure on school officials for reform. However, more research is needed to determine why. Is it due to design flaws in the content, organization, display or dissemination of the school data in school report cards? Comparative research varying type, level and socio-economic status of schools and their populations; district and state-level policies and requirements; and types of ethnic groups and neighborhoods is needed to test the preliminary findings in this chapter.

Another related question, however, is how realistic is it to assume that many parents, especially parents whose children are the least successful in school, have either the will, the resources or the understanding of the technology of teaching and learning to play an effective role as an outside monitor of school performance. Demographic and economic profiles of

today's families suggest that parents have less time than ever to devote to nonessential activities beyond raising their children and maintaining their jobs. Or, even if through extensive parental education, the level of understanding and involvement of parents could be raised, policymakers would then be faced with an additional determination: at what level might those same resources be more effectively used on other reform strategies.

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